



Football Fandom and European Practices of Social Cohesion: How Football Fandom Shapes and Structures Cross-Border Communication and Travel in Europe

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Abstract

This paper investigates how football fandom as a highly popular and socially diverse leisure activity contributes to practices of social cohesion within Europe and interacts with underlying socio-demographic and socio-economic inequalities. Behaviours such as cross-border communication and travel across the continent are concrete contributors to social cohesion in the European Union and broader Europe, as they induce inter-cultural and inter-personal contacts and promote exchanges and collaboration between otherwise unconnected European citizens. However, engaging in these interactions is often influenced by socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, since more well-off, more highly educated, more physically able individuals, as well as those more strongly socialised with international exchanges have a higher propensity for cross-border engagement. Football fandom provides a unique setting to explore whether these inequalities can be overcome. This paper addresses two key questions: (1) Does football fandom increase the likelihood of cross-border communication and travel? (2) Does football fandom mitigate socio-demographic and socio-economic inequalities in these practices? Based on Schiefer and van der Noll's (2017) framework of social cohesion and using representative population data, the study examines the effects of football fandom and socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, as well as their interaction, on cross-border engagement in fans and non-fans. The results indicate that football fandom significantly enhances cross-border communication and travel, supporting the view that fandom can strengthen European social cohesion. However, football fandom partially amplifies underlying disparities regarding age and education status. These mixed results suggest that while football fandom can induce social interactions that strengthen social cohesion across Europe, it does not serve as a strong equaliser of social inequalities in cross-border engagement.

Keywords Social cohesion · Leisure · Football fandom · European integration

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1 Introduction

The connectedness, mutual understanding, solidarity, and trust among groups in society or of society itself, that is, their social cohesion, is increasingly regarded as both a political goal and an area of academic inquest. Social cohesion is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with a variety of indicators (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) across multiple dimensions and levels. Attention towards cohesion in the European Union (EU) and broader Europe is relatively novel, as the broadening and deepening of political, economic, social, and cultural integration in Europe has only fairly recently created the possibility to construct and assess cohesion at the European level. In light of the intersecting and interdependent challenges of the “second deeper and wider polycrisis” (Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024, p. 3012) that threatens the unity and stability of Europe as a political and social project, fostering stronger connectedness, mutual understanding, solidarity, and trust among its citizens would strengthen the legitimacy and political capacity of the European community to act collectively against the environmental, social, political, and security-related threats it is facing.

In building social cohesion in Europe, seemingly apolitical educational, cultural, and/or leisure activities might provide “more positive undercurrents to the gloom of contemporary national party politics in Europe” (Recchi & Favell, 2019, p. 23) that is rife with conflict and marked by rising Euroscepticism (Schäfer & Gross, 2020; Vries, 2018). There is a multitude of programmes, initiatives, and opportunities for citizens to personally engage with other Europeans beyond the narrowly political. Examples include the Erasmus programme, the European Capital of Culture initiative, or tourist activities, all of which induce cross-border exchanges in the form of both communication between European citizens and international mobility. These practices constitute relational-behavioural markers of social cohesion. However, participation in these activities is often only accessible to limited, rather elite sections of society. Those with fewer economic, psychological, or physical resources often find it difficult to participate in these activities, resulting in structural disparities in the connectedness of citizens across Europe, which in turn threaten and/or diminish social cohesion.

Sports fandom, and football in particular, stands out as a leisure activity that is a powerful catalyst for fostering social interaction, shared identities, common values, and ultimately social cohesion beyond those disparities. As arguably the world’s most popular sport, football bridges socio-economic, cultural, and national divides, creating networks of communication, cooperation, and shared practices through its diverse participatory fan culture(s). In Europe, the social dynamics of football fandom are amplified by the sport’s deep Europeanisation. Over recent decades, processes such as the liberalisation of player markets, the rise of continental competitions, and the emergence of transnational organisations situate fans within a “European football sphere” (Finger et al., 2023, p. 137). Here, the social dimension of football fandom extends beyond local or national boundaries, manifesting in a multitude of touchpoints with Europe—among them interpersonal contacts and exchanges on a continental scale. Its popularity, its non-elite nature, and its strong European connectedness make football fandom a more inclusive stage for cohesive practices across Europe,

capable of fostering interpersonal connections and thus broader societal cohesion beyond socio-demographic and socio-economic divides.

This article¹ explores whether football fandom promotes intercultural and interpersonal exchanges through cross-border communication and travel, and whether it serves to alleviate inequalities in engaging in these practices. Using representative survey data from Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain, the study employs cumulative link mixed regression models to examine the relationship between football fandom, socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, and cross-border practices. The results reveal that football fandom significantly enhances cross-border communication and travel, thus contributing to European social cohesion. However, football fandom also amplifies underlying inequalities related to age and education status. These findings show football's potential for fostering cohesion 'from below' while also pointing to its limitations as an equaliser of structural disparities. Thereby, the study contributes to the literature on football fandom, on leisure and social cohesion, and on European integration in times of crisis by demonstrating empirically how football fandom fosters tangible practices of social cohesion in Europe.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Practices of Social Cohesion in Europe

Social cohesion is a complex and multifaceted concept that is frequently declared as a desirable societal goal or a condition under threat by politicians and examined by social scientist as a key property of social groups (Berger-Schmitt, 2002; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Concrete definitions and operationalisations of social cohesion are (at times) inconsistent and some conceptual ambiguities in both the theoretical as well as methodological application of the term exist (Bottoni, 2018; Friedkin, 2004; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017; Vergolini, 2011). It is generally characterised as the "glue" that holds societies together (Moustakas, 2023, p. 1028), refers "to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society" (Manca, 2014, p. 6026), or describes "the quality of collective togetherness" (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 592). The concept of social cohesion extends across various sub-dimensions and levels and can manifest as attitudinal or behavioural markers in individuals (micro-level), as social processes or group-level conditions (meso-level), or as features of societal institutions or structural factors (macro-level) (Chan et al., 2006; Friedkin, 2004; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017; Tok et al., 2024).

Schiefer and van der Noll's (2017) "slim", "essentialist" and "gradual" definition provides tangible empirical markers to assess and measure social cohesion. It defines a cohesive society as possessing "close social relations, pronounced emotional connectedness to the social entity, and a strong orientation towards the common good" (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 592), thereby combining behavioural-relational, attitudinal, and value-based components while allowing for analysis across the

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micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. In this conceptualisation, “social relations between groups and individuals are the most prominent aspect of social cohesion” (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 585). This study focuses on the micro-relational-behavioural component of social cohesion in particular. It consists of the structure and intensity of social networks within a group, that is, at the individual level, the breadth and strength of social interactions a person has with others (Dragolov et al., 2016), and at the group level, the frequency and manner in which individuals engage in personal contacts and shared practices. These are direct empirical indicators of social cohesion - with more frequent and/or extensive social interactions between group members, the group can be considered to have stronger social cohesion. Beyond being markers of social cohesion as of themselves, social interactions play a critical role in reducing inter-group biases and stereotypes under appropriate conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), in the creation of mutual trust and common identifications (Dovidio et al., 2003; Gaertner et al., 1996), and contribute to the formation of social capital (Klein, 2013; Putnam, 2000). Conversely, they are influenced by underlying levels of trust, acceptance, shared values, and common identifications.

Therefore, social interactions constitute strong empirical markers for social cohesion. In a maximalist view, these interpersonal contacts can be understood not merely as indicators but as expressions of social cohesion itself - or at least of its relational core. At a minimum, through their intersection with and reciprocal dependency upon the more substantive or ‘thicker’ elements of cohesion, such as tolerance, mutual trust, shared norms, or social capital, such interactions form crucial preconditions for the emergence of stronger social cohesion and thus serve as indirect indicators. As suggested by research on the contact hypothesis, the effects of interpersonal contact depend on the conditions under which contact occurs, including factors like status equality, cooperative goals, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Gaertner et al., 1996). This means that a focus on social interactions alone risks being reductionist, as their contributions depend on the quality, context, and structure of such interactions. Nonetheless, social interactions offer a theoretically grounded and empirically measurable means of capturing a key dimension of the often-elusive concept of social cohesion.

Social interactions can manifest (and be measured) in a variety of ways and in different contexts or settings, as they encompass the myriad social practices and communicative exchanges individuals have with others in their daily lives. Empirically, they have been operationalised by the number of visits, telephone conversations, or personal favours between residents in a neighbourhood (Villarreal & Silva, 2006), the frequency of socially meeting friends, relatives, or colleagues (European Social Survey, 2020b Item C2; see also Dragolov et al., 2016), or the frequency of either face-to-face or mediated (phone, post, internet) contacts with individuals outside of the household (Eurofound, 2016, Item Q39).

As social cohesion describes the connectedness within or between social groups, delineating group boundaries is central to its analysis. The boundary conditions to assess intra-group or inter-group cohesion are commonly drawn along divisions of class, gender, ethnicity and/or religion (Chan et al., 2006). Beyond these properties, social cohesion is often analysed on political-administrative levels or within “territorial units” (Berger-Schmitt, 2002, p. 405), ranging from the local (e.g., neighbour-

hoods or cities) to the national scale (Dragolov et al., 2016). With deepening and broadening European integration, especially (but not limited to) the establishment of EU, a new political-administrative level on which social cohesion can be invoked, declared a political goal, or be empirically assessed has emerged. For the latter and following from the importance of social interactions for cohesion, the breadth and intensity of social relations between Europeans are paramount. Transactionalist theories of European integration emphasize the role of repeated interactions, communication, and exchanges across borders in fostering mutual trust, shared identities, and a sense of political, social, and cultural community among individuals and groups (Deutsch et al., 1957; Kuhn, 2011). European integration results in new, broader constructions of belonging and identification (Bruter, 2005; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Kaina et al., 2015) that complement or intersect with, but never replace, national and regional identities (Cram, 2009; Risse, 2015). Symbols of European unity alongside narratives of shared history and underlying values provide psychological anchors for individuals to identify with Europe as a historical or cultural space and political entity (Bruter, 2003, 2005). European integration has laid the groundwork for social cohesion to extend beyond the typically referenced local, regional, or national frameworks towards a truly transnational scale.

For many European citizens, integration has created a highly interconnected lifeworld through features such as the Schengen Area, the single market, a common currency, and a variety of bilateral, multilateral, or transnational programmes and initiatives facilitating economic collaboration and cultural exchange (Kuhn, 2015; Recchi & Favell, 2019). Examples of the latter include the Erasmus programme (Mitchell, 2015), international tourism (Gustafson, 2006, 2009), work-related mobility (Kahanec, 2013) or the European Capital of Culture initiative (Lähdesmäki, 2021). In this lifeworld, European citizens encounter a multitude of opportunities to form connections that transcend national boundaries. Personal interactions become a common occurrence through frequent cross-border mobility, temporary or permanent migration, and/or broad networks of familial ties and personal contacts extending across national boundaries. These social relations with an international, European scope are the key markers of cohesion at the European level, with the most relevant being cross-border communication and travel. Communicative behaviours between residents of different European countries are direct markers of European social relations, while cross-border mobility regularly results in personal contacts with other European citizens. These European practices of exchange constitute tangible indicators of social cohesion at the supranational level. However, many of these opportunities tend to be primarily available to younger citizens (e.g., university students in the case of Erasmus), individuals with higher levels of formal education and/or those with sufficient socio-economic resources. Similarly, political messaging promoting European political and social integration are frequently delivered through 'elite discourses' (Risse, 2015), primarily targeting or resonating within socio-economic elites. While these efforts contribute to a shared European identity among certain groups, their limited inclusivity highlights the need for broader, non-elite-targeted initiatives.

Generally, engagement in cross-border communication and travel is often stratified by socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, reflecting broader inequalities.

Younger individuals are more likely to partake in such practices, as they face fewer health and mobility constraints compared to older individuals, particularly when it comes to travel (Jamal & Newbold, 2020). In contrast, they typically have less disposable income than older citizens. Young people also possess more digital literacy (Antonio & Tuffley, 2015), are socialised in a more strongly internationalised life-world (Thorpe & Inglis, 2019), and thus likely have a higher propensity and capabilities for, and more experience with cross-border engagement. Living circumstances presumably also play a role: individuals in larger cities are more likely to engage in cross-border practices due to greater access to transportation infrastructure, such as international airports and rail networks, and exposure to cosmopolitan populations that foster international connections (Maxwell, 2020). In contrast, those in rural or less urbanised areas face barriers like limited infrastructure, fewer travel opportunities, and less exposure to international influences, which can constrain cross-border engagement. Education is also pivotal: higher education levels provide individuals with the language skills, inter-cultural competencies, and digital literacy necessary for international communication and cross-border travel. Individuals with higher (formal) education are also more likely to hold high-status, strongly internationalised jobs (Macmillan et al., 2015; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). Similarly, financial resources (i.e., income) are required, especially for international mobility (Metz, 2010). These socio-economic factors create structural inequalities that can hinder participation in cross-border practices, limiting access for those with fewer resources, lower educational attainment, or physical constraints, thus reinforcing existing societal divides. These disparities undermine equal participation in society by restricting access to cross-border engagement for certain social groups, thereby challenging the construction of social cohesion in Europe.

2.2 Football Fandom as a Leisurely Catalyst to Cross-Border Engagement

Football fandom is a highly popular and socio-economically diverse leisure activity with widespread engagement across different social groups: Fans come from all socio-economic strata of society, and broad sections of the population carry emotional attachments to teams, players, or the sport itself (Biel et al., 2025). They engage in various modes of football consumption and fan practices, and partake in diverse individual and collective inter-personal behaviours—attending matches, chants, or displaying materials, watching broadcasts, having football-related conversations (both personal or through social media), cooperation and constructive collaboration in both formal and informal networks, and, in extreme cases, verbal or physical violence (Cashmore & Cleland, 2014; Cleland et al., 2018; Doidge et al., 2020; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012). Through these practices, football extends beyond the match day “into people’s homes, workplaces and many spaces in between, connecting supporters within and across spatial boundaries to one another, to the products, images and discursive renderings of football culture and to collective memories of embodied experiences” (Stone, 2007).

Furthermore, football is highly Europeanised. With deepening and broadening European integration, football has been influenced by, adapted to, and itself shaped European regulatory dynamics and opened up a new supranational field of action

(Niemann et al., 2011, 2024). Key markers of this Europeanisation include the liberalisation of player markets following the ‘Bosman ruling’ (Binder & Findlay, 2012; Duval & Rompuy, 2016), the establishment of a de-facto Europe-wide league system through continental competitions (Brand et al., 2023; Niemann & Brand, 2020), the institutionalisation of transnational stakeholder associations like the European Club Association and Football Supporters Europe (García & Zheng, 2017; Mittag, 2018), and EU regulatory measures on broadcasting rights (Andreff & Bourg, 2006). This “European football sphere” (Finger et al., 2023, p. 137) exposes fans to Europe through internationalised squads, widely broadcast continental competitions evoking a European community (Niemann & Brand, 2020), and opportunities for cross-border activities enhanced by broader European integration, e.g., a common currency or freedom of movement across the Schengen area. These transformations have made football a central cultural space where European citizens engage with one another, both directly and indirectly, and thus experience the types of interactions that contribute to social cohesion.

This takes place through various mechanisms. Football entails manifold communicative behaviours, both between family and friends, as well as strangers (Porat, 2010). These occur both in person and on-line through social media (Cleland, 2011; Millward, 2016), with the latter especially facilitating cross-border communication between otherwise unconnected individuals (Weber et al., 2020, 2022). In football tourism, the sport is the catalyst to cross-border travel (Biel et al., 2025). International away games constitute important events that possess an “infectious” excitement for fans travelling across borders to support their clubs, with “Europe’s weird and wonderful” (Millward, 2006, p. 381) destinations being particularly enticing. Many people also travel independently of club allegiance by *groundhopping* — collecting and cataloguing visits to preferably famous or exotic stadia (Connell, 2017). Clubs and leagues intentionally promote football tourism by adapting ticketing and match day procedures to the demands of international visitors (McManus, 2020; Tobar & Ramshaw, 2022). Furthermore, so called fan friendships between organised fan groups, “particularly in Europe, [...] have a long and remarkably stable history. The mental maps of football fandom are not restricted to local and national rivalries but run transversal and cross, sometimes also unexpectedly, national boundaries.” (Alpan & Schwell, 2015, p. 5). These are often supported by shared social or political identities (Doidge, 2015) and result in reciprocal support, exchanges of materials or practices, and attendance at games of the respective other club (Baumann, 2024). Finally, shared struggles and common interests of fans result in coordinated collective action (Numerato, 2018; Turner, 2017; Turner & Millward, 2023) and the institutionalisation of fan organisations such as Football Supporters Europe (García & Zheng, 2017; Kennedy, 2012), again inducing cross-border communication and mobility. Therefore, being a football fan entails unique potential to (a) induce and sustain inter-personal contacts through communication and mobility across Europe, which in turn strengthens social cohesion in Europe. In addition, its distinctly non-elite nature might (b) help alleviate socio-demographic and socio-economic disparities in cross-border engagement, thus equalising structural underlying inequalities.

3 Hypotheses Development

The theoretical framework identifies inter-personal contacts as key markers of (the social relations subdimension of) social cohesion. At the European level, deepening and broadening political, social and cultural integration facilitates contacts between citizens through cross-border communication and travel. However, engagement in these practices is likely to be stratified by the material, psychological, and physical resources individuals possess. Football, as a broadly popular, non-elite, and highly Europeanised leisure activity, serves as a catalyst for a multitude of communicative and mobility behaviours across European borders. Consequently, two central research questions emerge:

- *RQ1: Does being a fan increase the likelihood of cross-border communication and travel?*
- *RQ2: Does being a fan mitigate socio-demographic and socio-economic inequalities in these practices?*

To address these questions, a series of hypotheses are proposed to examine how personal characteristics and being a fan influence cross-border communication and travel and how these factors interact. First, it is hypothesised that socio-demographic and socio-economic factors shape the extent of individuals' communication and travel activities across borders, and specifically that younger individuals are more likely to engage in cross-border communication and travel due to their stronger socialisation in highly interconnected, internationalised environments, greater digital literacy (facilitating communication in particular), and better physical health enabling more extensive mobility (facilitating travel). Higher levels of education are also expected to facilitate these practices through enhanced capacities such as foreign language skills, inter-cultural competencies, and digital literacy, and by enabling attaining high-status jobs in internationalised contexts. More affluent individuals are hypothesised to communicate and travel across borders more frequently, driven by the internationalised nature of high-status and well-paid jobs (and consequent more pronounced embeddedness in international networks of contacts) and the costs associated with travel. Finally, those that live in larger cities are hypothesised to have a higher propensity and more opportunities for international engagement. Consequently, is hypothesised:

- *H1: Socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, namely (a) age, (b) education, (c) income, and (d) living area influence the extent of an individual's cross-border communication.*
- *H2: Socio-demographic and socio-economic factors, namely (a) age, (b) education, (c) income, and (d) living area influence the extent of an individual's cross-border travel.*

Furthermore, being a fan is a highly internationalised leisure activity that entails various ways by which communication and travel are induced, especially in comparison to those who are not immersed in the lifeworld of football. Accordingly, the hypotheses are:

- *H3: Being a fan increases the likelihood of cross-border communication.*
- *H4: Being a fan increases the likelihood of cross-border travel.*

Finally, it is hypothesised that being a fan moderates the relationship between socio-demographic and socio-economic factors and cross-border communication and travel. As a distinctly non-elite activity, being a fan may reduce barriers to these practices and mitigate inequalities, because fan culture engages those who are typically excluded and/or disadvantaged in other sections of society. Since fans are highly emotionally attached to their favourite teams, and exhibit strong in-group identifications with fellow fans, football provides opportunities for personal interactions and travel that would otherwise not be available. The near universal appeal of football facilitates interpersonal contact, its Europeanised nature provides a structured setting for international travel, and the highly organised nature of fandom (e.g., fan clubs, supporter's organisations, international networks, etc.) lowers barriers related to language (Bergh & Ohlander, 2020), physical condition, and income. Therefore, fans of higher age, lower educational attainment, lesser resource endowment, and/or from less urbanised areas might be more likely to engage in cohesive practices than their non-fan counterparts. Consequently, it is hypothesised:

- *H5: Being a fan moderates the effects of socio-demographic and socio-economic factors on cross-border communication, by (a) reducing the negative effect of age, (b) reducing the positive effect of education, (c) reducing the positive effect of income, and (d) reducing the positive effect of living in a larger city.*
- *H6: Being a fan moderates the effects of socio-demographic and socio-economic factors on cross-border travel, by (a) reducing the negative effect of age, (b) reducing the positive effect of education, (c) reducing the positive effect of income, and (d) reducing the positive effect of living in a larger city.*

In summary, the hypotheses and sub-hypotheses examine how socio-demographic and socio-economic factors influence cross-border communication and travel, the extent to which being a fan increases these practices and how being a fan moderates inequalities in their engagement.

4 Data and Methodology

The study relies on data collected through a survey conducted by the commercial panel provider Dynata across four European countries: Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain. Utilising quotas for gender, age, and education based on OECD data ensured a dataset representative of the population in each country. After data cleaning procedures, such as over quota removal and deletion of inconsistent or implausible data (e.g., straight-line responses), a total of 1,760 completed and valid responses were collected per country (7,040 participants in total). The survey consisted of demographic items capturing socio-economic and contextual variables such as age, gender, education, and income, as well as modes and frequencies of contact with Europe; political and social items on political values and attitudes, with a focus on the

European level; and a football-related module examining engagement with football in a European context.

Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain were selected to represent diverse football traditions, political affiliations with Europe, and socio-cultural contexts. Germany and Spain as highly successful footballing nations with strongly internationalised leagues contrast with the less internationalised and less prestigious leagues in Poland and Norway. Politically, the countries have diverse relationships with Europe: Germany is a founding EU member, Spain and Poland joined in subsequent enlargement phases in 1986 and 2004, respectively, and Norway has strong affiliations through its memberships in the European Economic Area and the Schengen Agreement (Fossum, 2019). These variations provide a highly heterogeneous context for analysing the links between football fandom and cross-border practices of social cohesion across Europe.

The dependent variables used for the analysis are two items that ask survey participants about the frequency with which they communicate with Europeans outside of their home country and how often they travel to other European countries. Answers are captured on a nine-point ordinal scale (0 - never, 1 - less than once a year, 2 - once a year, 3 - a few times a year, 4 - once every month, 5 - once every two weeks, 6 - once a week, 7 - several times a week, 8 - every day). The key independent variable is a binary fandom variable based on whether respondents self-identify as football fans ("Do you consider yourself a football fan?"). Furthermore, variables are used that capture modes of engaging with Europe, both generally and in the context of football. Respondents were asked a binary "Yes"/"No"-question about the aspects of daily life that bring them into contact with Europe, with the answer options "Work or Education", "Family or Friends", "Vacation/Travel", "Cuisine/Food", "Arts and Culture", "Football", and "Other Sports". Additionally, those who identify as football fans were asked about how they communicate and travel in the context of football, again asking binary "Yes"/"No"-questions about whether they talk to others about football in person or online, whether they travel to away games of the club they support, or whether they have attended football games independently of club allegiance when travelling internationally.

Additional important independent variables are a respondents' age, their education status (categorised as low, middle, or high in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011), their household income (using country-specific income scales equivalent to those used in ESS Round 10, Appendix A2) (European Social Survey, 2020a). Finally, as living circumstances might influence an individual's opportunities and propensities for cross-border engagement, whether respondents live in a rural area or village, a town, or a city is included as a proxy for socio-structural factors. A set of factors serves as control variables, including respondent's gender, whether the respondent is a citizen of the respective country, a combined measure of generalised social trust from the items "Do people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?" and "Would people try to take advantage of you, or would they try to be fair?", and a measure of cosmopolitan values captured by the question "It is important that people from different nations are in touch to better understand each other's lives and perspectives". The latter three items are represented on a 10-point scale.

Using the survey data, first simple descriptive statistics are used to summarise and compare key items related to practices of social cohesion. These include the extent of cross-border communication and travel for both fans and non-fans, as well as various types of football-related engagement that facilitate cross-border interactions among fans. To investigate the relationships between football fandom, socio-demographic factors, and cross-border practices, cumulative link mixed models (CLMM) are used. This method accounts for the ordinal nature of the dependent variables and captures the nested structure of the dataset (observations within countries). Multivariate models with multiple independent variables and controls (football fandom, age, education, income, living area, gender, generalised trust, cosmopolitan values, and citizenship) are used to account for potentially confounding factors. These models were constructed both with and without interaction terms. The inclusion of interaction terms allows for the investigation of whether football fandom moderates the effects of socio-demographic factors (e.g., age, education, income) on cross-border communication and travel.

5 Results

The results of the analysis are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4. First, the descriptive results reveal that respondents in our data set report substantial cross-border engagement. Table 1 shows that contacts with Europe occur frequently in many different domains of daily life, and most respondents report regular communication and at least yearly travel to other European countries. When considering football fan identification, fans report higher levels of engagement with Europe than non-fans in general and across different parts of daily life. 61.73% of fans report football-related contact with Europe, showing how football constitutes a distinct domain in everyday life in which Europe becomes a tangible factor. This appears to extend into other sports as well, where football fans also report notably higher contact with Europe. Beyond sports, while differences are minor, fans report higher levels of cross-border interactions through work or education, personal contacts, travel, and food, and are thus more likely to experience contact with Europe in all other domains of daily life except for arts and culture.

Second, as presented in Table 2, football fans are more active in communicating with individuals across European borders. They are more likely than non-fans to communicate every day (8.60% vs. 6.08%) and are substantially more represented

Table 1 Reported overview of contact with Europe by fan self-identification

Question	Fan Identification	Work or Education	Family or Friends	Vacation/Travel	Cuisine/Food	Arts and Culture	Football	Other Sports
What brings you into contact with Europe?	Fan	20.70	42.72	70.30	42.95	30.96	61.73	18.09
	Non-Fan	15.50	40.20	66.52	40.20	31.09	5.98	8.10

Table 2 Reported cross-border communication and travel by fan self-identification

Question	Fan Identification	Never	Less than once a year	Once a year	Few times a year	Once every month	Once every two weeks	Once a week	Several times a week	Every day
How often do you communicate with people living in Europe outside of[COUNTRY]?	Fan	9.81	8.26	3.61	16.54	11.53	9.63	13.65	18.38	8.60
	Non-Fan	19.19	12.91	4.91	19.73	10.72	6.15	8.84	11.46	6.08
How often do you travel to other countries in Europe?	Fan	7.34	20.79	22.42	35.21	4.99	3.35	2.18	2.61	1.12
	Non-Fan	14.89	31.23	23.43	25.21	2.66	0.71	1.04	0.47	0.37

in the higher frequency categories. Conversely, non-fans are overrepresented in lower-frequency categories, with 19.19% of non-fans never engaging in cross-border communication compared to 9.81% of fans. A similar pattern is observed in travel behaviour. Fans are more likely to travel “a few times a year” (35.21% vs. 25.21%) or “once every month” (4.99% vs. 2.66%). Non-fans, on the other hand, predominantly fall into the lower-frequency categories, with 14.89% reporting they “never” travel compared to just 7.34% of fans.

Third, Table 3 presents the specific modes through which fans engage with football in terms of communication and mobility, further demonstrating how the sport facilitates cross-border interactions. In-person discussions about football are the most common mode of engagement, as reported by 59% of fans. In contrast, online communication is less frequent, with 21.36% of fans engaging in digital discussions about football. Although these data do not specify with *whom* — whether fellow nationals or other European citizens — these communicative behaviours occur, they show football’s ability to foster interpersonal interaction. Furthermore, 13.07% of fans report travelling to away games of their club, and 41.54% report having visited a football match independently of club allegiance when traveling internationally. These activities illustrate how football fandom intersects with mobility behaviours, including on a European scale.

Table 4 shows the estimates for the CLMMs analysing the relationships between football fandom, socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and cross-border communication and travel. In these models, the odds ratios (OR) indicate the change in the odds of engaging in a higher frequency category of cross-border communication or travel for a one-unit increase in the predictor variable or a switch between categories of a categorical variable. Models A and F capture the effects of individual variables without interaction terms. Here, football fandom is a strong and significant positive predictor for engaging in cross-border practices. Fans are more likely than non-fans to engage in higher-frequency communication and travel across European borders. The socio-demographic and socio-economic factors theorised above — age, education, income, and living area — also play significant roles. Age shows a negative relationship, with older individuals engaging less frequently in cross-border activities. Higher education levels (both middle and high) and greater household income positively influence these practices, aligning with expectations that resource endowment — whether educational or financial — enhances engagement. The effect for income is particularly strong for international travel. An individual’s living area also has a notable impact, with individuals from towns or cities participating more frequently than those in rural areas. Higher interpersonal trust and more pronounced cosmopolitan values unsurprisingly also raise the likelihood of cross-border engagement, while gender shows no significant effects. Finally, being a citizen is associated with substantially lower odds of cross-border engagement when compared to non-citizens, showing an effect of migration histories and stronger transnational ties.

The interaction models show more nuanced results. Models B and G demonstrate that football fandom mitigates the negative effect of age on cross-border communication and travel. The interaction between age and football fandom (Models B and G) reveals that the age-related decline in cross-border communication and travel is

Table 3 Reported modes of communication and travel of football fans

Question	Talk about football with others in person	Talk about football with others online	Travel to away games of your club	Visit football games independently of club allegiance
How do you engage with football?	59.00	21.36	13.07	41.54

slightly steeper for fans compared to non-fans. In Model B, the odds ratio for age alone is 0.982, while the combined effect for fans (with the interaction term) is 0.968 (0.982×0.986), thus indicating an accelerated decline. Similarly, in Model G, the effects are 0.984 (for non-fans) and 0.966 (0.985×0.981 , for fans). This suggests that football fandom modestly amplifies the age-related decline in cross-border practices.

The interaction effect between education and football fandom indicates that the relationship between higher education and cross-border practices is amplified for fans. For individuals with middle education, the odds ratio for non-fans is 1.085 (Model C) and non-significant, while for fans, the combined effect is 1.488 (1.085×1.371), suggesting a stronger positive relationship. For those with high education in Model C, the interaction effect is estimated as 1.541, while for fans it is 1.906 (1.541×1.237), though it is also not statistically significant. In Model H, the interaction is more pronounced. For middle education, the odds ratio for non-fans is 1.475, while for fans, it increases to 2.264 (1.475×1.535). For high education, the odds ratio for non-fans is 2.035, and for fans, the combined effect is 3.348 (2.035×1.645). Both are statistically significant. These results suggest that football fandom amplifies the positive effect of education on cross-border engagement, particularly for those with middle or high levels of education.

The interaction effect between household income and football fandom in both Models D and I is not statistically significant, suggesting that football fandom does not meaningfully alter the relationship between household income and cross-border practices. Both fans and non-fans experience a similar positive association between income and cross-border engagement, with no additional moderation. Similarly, the interaction effects between football fandom and living area in Models E and J show no significant moderation, meaning that being a fan does not amplify or alleviate the effect of an individual's living circumstances on their cross-border engagement.

To illustrate the interaction effects between football fandom the socio-demographic and socio-economic variables on cross-border communication and travel, Fig. 1 shows the estimated marginal means on the latent scale used in the regression models. It presents the predicted values of cross-border engagement at different levels of the predictor variables (age, education, household income, and living area), with other covariates held constant². The visualisations confirm the results of the regression models and in particular show the differential effects of fandom on age and education. At a younger age, the differences between fans and non-fans are much more pronounced than at older ages. The same is true for rising educational attain-

² Interpersonal trust and cosmopolitan values are held at their means, gender and citizenship are set to their modal categories "Female" and "Citizen". Where not involved in the interaction, age and education are also held at the mean, education and living area are held at their modal categories, "Middle" and "Town".

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[illegible]

Table 4 (continued)

Characteristic	A			B			C			D			E			F			G			H			I			J		
	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI	P
Football Fandom X Household Income										0.993	0.017	0.673													0.999	0.017	0.951			
Football Fandom X Living Area (Town)													0.984	0.109	0.881													0.972	0.113	0.805
Football Fandom X Living Area (City)													1.030	0.116	0.799													1.039	0.119	0.748

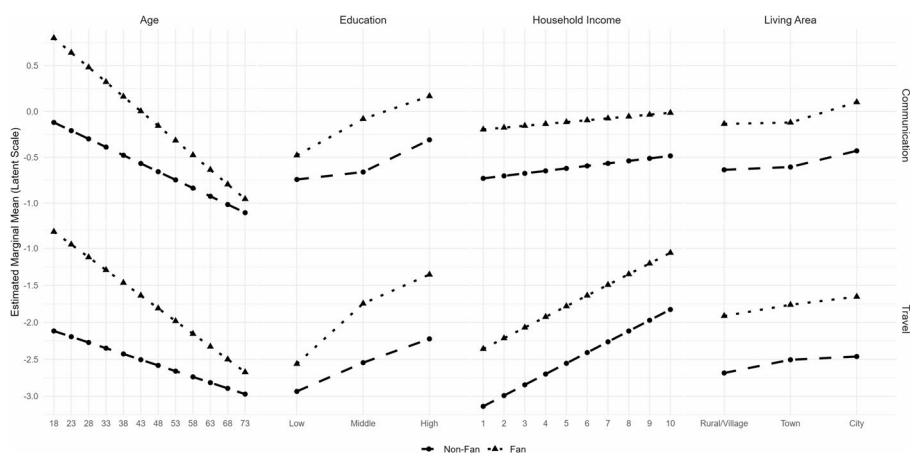


Fig. 1 Estimated marginal means for interaction effects

ment. Through these visualisations, the amplifying effects of fandom on younger age groups and more highly educated individuals becomes apparent.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the analysis allow evaluating the hypotheses regarding the effects of football fandom, age, education, and income on cross-border communication and travel, as well as the hypothesised moderating effects of fandom. First, the results consistently support the hypotheses that socio-demographic and socio-economic factors influence the extent of cross-border engagement. Younger individuals, those with higher levels of education, greater income, and urban living environments are significantly more likely to engage in cross-border communication and travel, confirming hypotheses H1 and H2. Second, football fandom is itself a strong predictor, with fans significantly more likely than non-fans to participate in cross-border practices, providing robust support for hypotheses H3 and H4. The hypotheses addressing the moderating effects of football fandom provide more varied findings. Contrary to H5a and H6a, fandom modestly amplifies the age-related decline in cross border engagement, meaning that while still showing a higher baseline than non-fans, it is younger fans who are particularly inclined towards cross-border communication and travel. The interaction of fandom and education reveals stronger effects: fandom amplifies the positive relationship between higher education levels and cross-border practices, contradicting H5b and H6b. In contrast, no significant interaction effects are observed for household income or living area, indicating that fandom does not reduce income-related disparities (H5c and H6c) or mitigate the influence of living area (H5d and H6d). Neither of the interaction hypotheses can be accepted.

These findings reveal two core insights. They (a) show the role football fandom can play in inducing cohesive behaviours on a European level. Football fandom as a highly Europeanised and accessible cultural phenomenon facilitates practices that are central to creating interpersonal contacts and tangible exchanges between otherwise

disparate individuals across borders, thus directly contributing to social cohesion. While the precise effects (i.e., the directionality and intensity) of these contacts on social cohesion are conditional on the context, quality, and structure of interaction, these results at a minimum confirm that football fandom is linked to crucial prerequisites of social cohesion that might serve to build the ‘thicker’ attitudinal and value-based connections between European citizens. At the same time, the results highlight (b) important limitations in football fandom’s potential to equalise socio-demographic and socio-economic disparities in cross-border engagement. Fandom amplifies rather than diminishes the advantages held by individuals with higher education and younger age when it comes to cross-border practices. Furthermore, income-related or geographic inequalities in these practices persist regardless of fan status. Consequently, while an amplification of cohesive practices through football can be found, football fandom does not constitute a ‘great equaliser’ of underlying socio-demographic or socio-economic disparities.

The implications of these results for broader social cohesion across Europe are significant. In a continent marked by the “second Polycrisis” (Nicoli & Zeitlin, 2024) of overlapping and intersecting challenges and growing political and social fragmentation, football is a grassroots mechanism for fostering cohesion (or at least its social-relational prerequisites) ‘from below’. Unlike rather elitist and highly particular initiatives such as Erasmus or the European Capital of Culture programmes, which often engage specific populations or geographic areas, football connects diverse, heterogenous groups via shared practices of communication and mobility. It generates opportunities for personal exchange and contact on a scale unmatched by many other European programmes. These findings emphasise football’s potential to promote unity and social cohesion in an increasingly divided continent, as fans are consistently more likely to engage in cross-border practices than non-fans. However, being a fan primarily benefits those who are already more connected to Europe, while it has only a limited impact on more disengaged segments of society. As in broader society, fans who are highly educated, economically better off, urban, and younger tend to be the most deeply immersed in a Europeanised lifeworld. This reflects and reinforces underlying and enduring structural barriers to communication and mobility in Europe and suggests that the resulting transnational interactions may primarily reinforce the existing cosmopolitan identities of certain subsets of the population rather than broadening the base on which European social cohesion is built. However, with still prevalent (Grimm et al., 2017), and by some accounts rising (Vinocur & Goury-Laffont, 2024), Eurosceptic attitudes among young voters, football with its amplifying age effect might be an avenue to engage young people in particular with Europe and thus counterbalance dis-integrative and divisive tendencies.

With these results, the study contributes to discourses on how European integration has Europeanised everyday, life-worldly pursuits for many citizens and the consequent adaptations regarding their identities and constructions of belonging (Brand et al., 2024; Kuhn, 2015; Recchi & Favell, 2019), and sheds light on differential outcomes of this Europeanisation. It also adds to the literature on how identities and social cohesion can be shaped and negotiated in current times of crisis (Nicoli et al., 2024; Schimmelfennig, 2024) by highlighting a seemingly non-political pathway (but also its shortcomings) of fostering cohesion on the continent. Finally, these

results contribute to the broader study of social cohesion through leisure and sports by addressing at least two key gaps identified in the literature (Moustakas & Robrade, 2023). First, the analysis provides a rare empirical examination of direct markers of social cohesion — cross-border communication and travel — using quantitative data. While social interactions alone are likely not sufficient to build stronger social cohesion, they still constitute tangible and thus measurable expressions of a key dimension of social cohesion. Second, it shows the transfer of sports-related cohesive practices to broader society, in this case the contribution of sports fandom to interpersonal contacts, and thus the social relations dimension of social cohesion across Europe. The study allows for robust inferences about the impact of this leisure pursuit on European societies as a whole, especially since it uses representative population data. Still, the results highlight a fundamental tension in conceptualising social cohesion through leisure: while shared leisure activities can create interpersonal bonds and facilitate cohesion, they might not be able overcome socio-structural barriers to participation.

Beyond its contributions to academic discourse, the study also has broad policy implications. As there is significant potential in football fan communities for strengthening the relational foundation of social cohesion across Europe, it is essential that fan communities remain or (where not already the case) become accessible, safe, inclusive, diverse, and participative spaces. Addressing the barriers that prevent lower-income and less-educated individuals in particular from engaging in football, and consequently in the cross-border experiences it entails, would help attenuate the underlying structural inequalities. Measures that support the institutionalisation of dedicated fan work would allow for more extensive and constructive international exchanges between fans. Strengthening interest representation and the political efficacy of fans would also allow harnessing this cohesive potential. The results of this study can thus contribute to a more targeted, deliberate social sports policy across Europe that preserves and harnesses the inherent social value of football (Finger et al., 2024a, b).

While this study provides important insights into the role of football fandom in fostering cross-border engagement and social cohesion, it also has several limitations. First, the observational nature of the data restricts causal claims about the relationship between fandom and transnational practices. Longitudinal studies or experimental designs could better establish causal mechanisms. Second, while the study identifies structural inequalities in cross-border engagement, it does not fully capture the qualitative experiences of how fans from different socio-economic contexts experience and partake in the opportunities brought about by the Europeanisation of football. The study does not assess the interpersonal dynamics, meanings, or emotional content of such interactions. Future research should investigate the quality and contextual conditions of football-related contacts, especially through qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, observational fieldwork, or ethnographic studies, in order to assess their impacts on other, ‘thicker’ attitudinal or value-based markers of social cohesion. Finally, comparative studies could assess whether similar dynamics exist in other sports or domains of leisure and everyday life to better understand the broader relationship between leisure, social cohesion, and European integration.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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